

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KINGSTON 000024

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CAR (BENT)  
NSC FOR SHANNON  
SOUTHCOM FOR POLAD AND J7 (RHANNAN)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV JM PREL

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER SEAGA TO STEP DOWN AFTER 43 YEARS IN PARLIAMENT

¶11. Summary. Opposition leader Edward Seaga on December 29 announced his retirement from representational politics after nearly 43 years as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Western Kingston. Seaga, who had previously stated his intention to step down as party leader by January 31, 2005, surprised some party officials with the announcement that he will now depart earlier, in mid-January, and that he will also leave his role as MP. Seaga's exit from politics to take up what he described as a "high ranking academic position at the University of the West Indies" (UWI) leaves the Jamaica Labor Party (JLP) without an MP in Western Kingston, and without an opposition leader for the upcoming session of the House of Representatives, which will resume on January 11. As the party scrambles to resolve a somewhat awkward situation, there is much public speculation as to who will likely replace Seaga. End Summary.

¶12. At a meeting of JLP delegates on December 29, opposition leader and former prime minister Edward Seaga, who has represented his Western Kingston garrison community as MP continuously since 1962, announced that he was "obliged to give up (his) involvement in active politics" to make himself available for selection to a top position at the University of the West Indies. The academic appointment, to be confirmed by the end of January, is reported to be a chair in the Department of Government at UWI. Seaga had announced in June 2004 that he would step down as party leader, but it was widely expected that he would remain as MP for Western Kingston, a fiercely loyal constituency and JLP stronghold.

¶13. The annual JLP conference, scheduled for November 2004, was to be the venue for electing Seaga's successor to the party leadership. However, the vote was postponed when leadership contender Pernell Charles took the party to court, challenging the constitutionality of the process. The issue was resolved, and the party conference is now scheduled to take place on February 19, 2005. On that date, the party will choose its new leader, who will run for the office of prime minister in the next general elections, to be held by ¶12007. Seaga's earlier-than-expected departure, however, leaves the JLP with two immediate vacancies to be filled. First, the JLP needs an interim opposition leader when Parliament resumes on January 11. In addition, Seaga's West Kingston constituency needs a new parliamentary representative.

¶14. Party watchers suggest that Ken Baugh, MP for Western Central St. Catherine and opposition spokesman on health, is the likely favorite to serve as opposition spokesman in parliament until the JLP elects a new leader in February. A source told Poloff that Baugh is not known to have political aspirations beyond his current position, and is considered a safe interim spokesman who will not "rock the boat."

¶15. Seaga's choice to succeed him as MP for Western Kingston is reported to be Olivia "Babsy" Grange, currently the MP for Central St. Catherine. Major news outlets indicated that Seaga proposed to Grange that she should take over West Kingston and that Senator Bruce Golding should take over Grange's current Central St. Catherine constituency. Golding, the front-runner to succeed Seaga as party leader in February, represented Central St. Catherine until 1997, but does not currently hold a parliamentary seat.

¶16. Contrary to Seaga's apparent wishes, however, the Western Kingston constituency committee on January 2 expressed its preference for Kingston Mayor and deputy chairman of the constituency, Desmond McKenzie, to replace Seaga as MP. To date, McKenzie has publicly declined the nomination, preferring to focus on his current role as mayor of the capital. Seaga has called a meeting on January 3 to review the applications of all candidates for MP, including attorney-at-law Tom Tavares-Finson, who has also expressed an interest in representing Western Kingston in parliament.

¶17. Comment: JLP general secretary Karl Samuda described this as an awkward period for the party.<sup>8</sup> With a national conference postponed first by Hurricane Ivan and then by a court battle between the two leading contenders for party leadership, the JLP's public image has suffered in recent

months. An interim opposition leader in parliament and the possibility of up to two vacant parliamentary seats threaten the party's position even further, particularly in the face of the impending general election. Also problematic is that when Seaga resigns from his position as MP for Western Kingston in mid-January, the position will remain vacant until the sitting government calls for a by-election in the region. However, the current government little to gain from calling by-elections in a JLP stronghold like Western Kingston. Some observers therefore find it unlikely that the PNP government will choose to call by-elections in the immediate future. Even without intentional foot-dragging on the part of the government, elections will take time and money to organize, and it could be weeks before a new JLP MP will be elected to replace Seaga.

TIGHE